THE ECCLESIAZUSAE

(SCENE:—*The Orchestra represents a public square in Athens; in the background are two houses with an alley between them.*)

PRAXAGORA

(*swinging the lantern, which is to be a signal for the other women; in high tragic style*)

OH! THOU shining light of my earthenware lamp, from this high spot shalt thou look abroad. Oh! lamp, I will tell thee thine origin and thy future; 'tis the rapid whirl of the potter's wheel that has lent thee thy shape, and thy wick counterfeits the glory of the sun; mayst thou send the agreed signal flashing afar! In thee alone do we confide, and thou art worthy, for thou art near us when we practise the various postures in which Aphrodité delights upon our couches, and none dreams even in the midst of her sports of seeking to avoid thine eye that watches us. Thou alone shinest into the secret recesses of our thighs and dost singe the hair that groweth there, and with thy flame dost light the actions of our loves. If we open some cellar stored with fruits and wine, thou art our companion, and never dost thou betray or reveal to a neighbour the secrets thou hast learned about us. Therefore thou shalt know likewise the whole of the plot that I have planned with my friends, the women, at the festival of the Scirophoria.

(*She pauses and looks about her.*)

I see none of those I was expecting, though dawn approaches; the Assembly is about to gather and we must take our seats in spite of Phyromachus, who forsooth would say, "It is meet the women sit apart and hidden from the eyes of the men." Why, have they not been able then to procure the false beards that they must wear, or to steal their husbands' cloaks? Ah! I see a light approaching; let us draw somewhat aside, for fear it should be a man.

(*She hides in the alley. From the right a woman enters, followed almost immediately by others. All are carrying staffs, men's sandals, and cloaks over their arms.*)

First Woman

Let us start, it is high time; as we left our dwellings, the cock was crowing for the second time.

Praxagora (*to herself*)

And I have spent the whole night waiting for you. (*She emerges from the alley.*) But come, let us call our neighbour by scratching at her door; and gently too, so that her husband may hear nothing.

Second Woman

(*coming out of her house; she is dressed like a man, with a staff in her hand*)

I was putting on my shoes, when I heard you scratching, for I was not asleep, so there! Oh! my dear, my husband (he is a Salaminian) never left me an instant's peace, but was at me, for ever at me, all night long, so that it was only just now that I was able to filch his cloak.

Praxagora

I see Clinareté coming too, along with Sostraté and their next-door neighbour Philaeneté. (*To the women that are just arriving; in a loud voice*) Hurry yourselves then, for Glycé has sworn that the last comer shall forfeit three measures of wine and a *choenix* of pease.

Second Woman

Don't you see Melisticé, the wife of Smicythion, hurrying hither in her big shoes? I think she is the only one of us all who has had no trouble in getting rid of her husband.

First Woman

And can't you see Geusistraté, the tavern-keeper's wife, with a lamp in her hand?

Praxagora

And the wives of Philodoretus and Chaeretades, and a great many others; all the useful people in the city, in fact.

Third Woman

Oh! my dear, I have had such trouble in getting away! My husband ate such a surfeit of sprats last evening that he was coughing and choking the whole night long.

Praxagora

Take your seats, and, since you are all gathered here at last, let us see if what we decided on at the feast of the Scirophoria has been duly done.

First Woman

Yes. Firstly, as agreed, I have let the hair under my armpits grow thicker than a bush; furthermore, whilst my husband was at the Assembly, I rubbed myself from head to foot with oil and then stood the whole day long in the sun.

Second Woman

So did I. I began by throwing away my razor, so that I might get quite hairy, and no longer resemble a woman.

Praxagora

Have you the beards that we had all to get ourselves for the Assembly?

First Woman

Yea, by Hecaté! Is this not a fine one?

Second Woman

Aye, much finer even than the one Epicrates has.

Praxagora (*to the other women*)

And you?

First Woman

Yes, yes; look, they all nod assent.

Praxagora

I see that you have got all the rest too, Spartan shoes, staffs and men's cloaks, as it was arranged.

First Woman

I have brought Lamias' club, which I stole from him while he slept.

Praxagora

What, the club that makes him fart with its weight?

Second Woman

By Zeus the Deliverer, if he had the skin of Argus, he would know better than any other how to shepherd the popular herd.

Praxagora

But come, let us finish what has yet to be done, while the stars are still shining; the Assembly, at which we mean to be present, will open at dawn.

First Woman

Good; you must take up your place at the foot of the platform and facing the Prytanes.

SECOND WOMAN

I have brought this with me to card during the Assembly.

(*She shows some wool.*)

PRAXAGORA

During the Assembly, wretched woman?

SECOND WOMAN

Surely, by Artemis! shall I hear any less well if I am doing a bit of carding? My little ones are all but naked.

PRAXAGORA

Think of her wanting to card! whereas we must not let anyone see the smallest part of our bodies.[1] 'Twould be a fine thing if one of us, in the midst of the discussion, rushed on to the speaker's platform and, flinging her cloak aside, showed her Phormisius. If, on the other hand, we are the first to take our seats closely muffled in our cloaks, none will know us. Let us fix these beards on our chins, so that they spread all over our bosoms. How can we fail then to be mistaken for men? Agyrrhius has deceived everyone, thanks to the beard of Pronomus; yet he was no better than a woman, and you see how he now holds the first position in the city. Thus, I adjure you by this day that is about to dawn, let us dare to copy him and let us be clever enough to possess ourselves of the management of affairs. Let us save the ship of state, which just at present none seems able either to sail or row.

FIRST WOMAN (*in a tragic style*)

But where shall we find orators in an Assembly of women?

PRAXAGORA

Nothing simpler. Is it not said that the cleverest speakers are those who get made love to most often? Well, thanks to the gods, we are that by nature.

FIRST WOMAN

There's no doubt of that; but the worst of it is our inexperience.

PRAXAGORA

That's the very reason we are gathered here, in order to prepare the speech we must make in the Assembly. Hasten, therefore, all you who know aught of speaking, to fix on your beards.

SECOND WOMAN

Oh! you stupid thing! is there ever a one among us cannot use her tongue?

PRAXAGORA

Come, look sharp, on with your beard and become a man. As for me, I will do the same in case I should have a fancy for getting on to the platform. Here are the chaplets.

(*They all put on their beards.*)

SECOND WOMAN

Oh! great gods! my dear Praxagora, do look here! Is it not laughable?

PRAXAGORA

How laughable?

SECOND WOMAN

Our beards look like broiled cuttle-fishes.

PRAXAGORA (*pretending to be the herald*)

Priest, bring in the cat.[2] Step forward, please! Silence, Ariphrades! Go and take your seat. Now, who wishes to speak?

SECOND WOMAN

I do.

PRAXAGORA

Then put on this chaplet and success be with you.

SECOND WOMAN

There!

PRAXAGORA

Well then! begin.

SECOND WOMAN

Before drinking?

PRAXAGORA

Hah! she wants to drink!

SECOND WOMAN

Why, what else is the meaning of this chaplet?

PRAXAGORA

Get you hence! you would probably have played us this trick also before the people.

SECOND WOMAN

Well! don't the men drink then in the Assembly? [3]

PRAXAGORA

Now she's telling us the men drink!

SECOND WOMAN

Yes, by Artemis, and neat wine too. That's why their decrees breathe of drunkenness and madness. And why libations, why so many ceremonies, if wine plays no part in them? Besides, they abuse each other like drunken men, and you can see the archers dragging more than one uproarious drunkard out of the market-place.

PRAXAGORA

Go back to your seat, you are wandering.

SECOND WOMAN (*returning to her seat*)

Ah! I should have done better not to have muffled myself in this beard; my throat's afire and I feel I shall die of thirst.

PRAXAGORA

Who else wishes to speak?

FIRST WOMAN (*rising*)

I do.

PRAXAGORA

Quick then, take the chaplet; the time's running short. Try to speak worthily, let your language be truly manly, and lean on your staff with dignity.

FIRST WOMAN

I had rather have seen one of your regular orators giving you wise advice; but, as that is not to be, it behoves me to break silence; I cannot, for my part indeed, allow the tavern-keepers to fill up their wine-pits with water. No, by the two goddesses . . .

PRAXAGORA

What? by the two goddesses! [4] Wretched woman, where are your senses?

FIRST WOMAN

Eh! what? . . . I have not asked you for a drink.

PRAXAGORA

No, but you want to pass for a man, and you swear by the two goddesses. Otherwise you did very well.

FIRST WOMAN

Well then. By Apollo . . .

PRAXAGORA

Stop! All these details of language must be adjusted; else it is quite useless to go to the Assembly.

FIRST WOMAN

Give me back the chaplet; I wish to speak again, for I think I have got hold of something good. You women who are listening to me . . .

PRAXAGORA

Women again; why, you wretched creature, it's men that you are addressing.

FIRST WOMAN

That's the fault of Epigonus; I caught sight of him way over there, and I thought I was speaking to women.

PRAXAGORA

Come, withdraw and remain seated in the future. I am going to take this chaplet myself and speak in your name. May the gods grant success to my plans!

My country is as dear to me as it is to you, and I groan, I am grieved at all that is happening in it. Scarcely one in ten of those who rule it is honest, and all the others are bad. If you appoint fresh chiefs, they will do still worse. It is hard to correct your peevish humour; you fear those who love you and throw yourselves at the feet of those who betray you. There was a time when we had no assemblies, and then we all thought Agyrrhius a dishonest man; now they are established, he who gets money thinks everything is as it should be, and he who does not, declares all who sell their votes to be worthy of death.

SECOND WOMAN

By Aphrodité, that is well spoken.

PRAXAGORA

Why, wretched woman, you have actually called upon Aphrodité. Oh! what a fine thing it would have been if you had said that in the Assembly!

SECOND WOMAN

But I would not have done it then.

PRAXAGORA

Well, mind you don't fall into the habit. (*Resuming the oratorical manner*) When we were discussing the alliance,[5] it seemed as though it were all over with Athens if it fell through. No sooner was it made than we were vexed and angry, and the orator who had caused its adoption was compelled to seek safety in flight. Is there talk of equipping a fleet?

The poor man says, yes, but the rich citizen and the countryman say, no. You were angered against the Corinthians and they with you; now they are well disposed towards you, be so towards them. As a rule the Argives are dull, but the Argive Hieronymus is a distinguished chief. Herein lies a spark of hope; but Thrasybulus is far from Athens and you do not recall him.

SECOND WOMAN

Oh! what a brilliant man!

PRAXAGORA (*to her*)

That's better! that's fitting applause. (*Continuing her speech*) Citizens, you are the ones who are the cause of all this trouble. You vote yourselves salaries out of the public funds and care only for your own personal interests; hence the state limps along like Aesimus. But if you hearken to me, you will be saved. I assert that the direction of affairs must be handed over to the women, for they are the ones who have charge and look after our households.

ALL THE WOMEN

Very good, very good, that's perfect! Go on, go on.

PRAXAGORA (*ignoring this interruption*)

They are worth more than you are, as I shall prove. First of all they wash all their wool in warm water, according to the ancient practice; you will never see them changing their method. Ah! if Athens only acted thus, if it did not take delight in ceaseless innovations, would not its happiness be assured? Then the women sit down to cook, just as they always did; they carry things on their head just as they always did; they keep the Thesmophoria, just as they always did; they knead their cakes just as they always did; they make their husbands angry just as they always did; they receive their lovers in their houses just as they always did; they buy dainties just as they always did; they love unmixed wine just as they always did; they delight in being loved just as they always did. Let us therefore hand Athens over to them without endless discussions, without bothering ourselves about what they will do; let us simply hand them over the power, remembering that they are mothers and will therefore spare the blood of our soldiers; besides, who will know better than a mother how to forward provisions to the front? Woman is adept at getting money for herself and will not easily let herself be deceived; she understands deceit too well herself. I omit a thousand other advantages. Take my advice and you will live in perfect happiness.

FIRST WOMAN

How beautiful this is, my dearest Praxagora, how clever! But where, pray, did you learn all these pretty things?

PRAXAGORA

When the countryfolk were seeking refuge in the city,[6] I lived on the Pnyx with my husband, and there I learnt to speak through listening to the orators.

FIRST WOMAN

Then, dear, it's not astonishing that you are so eloquent and clever; henceforward you shall be our leader, so put your great ideas into execution. But if Cephalus belches forth insults against you, what answer will you give him in the Assembly?

PRAXAGORA

I shall say that he is drivelling.

FIRST WOMAN

But all the world knows that.

PRAXAGORA

I shall furthermore say that he is a raving madman.

FIRST WOMAN

There's nobody who does not know that.

PRAXAGORA

That he, as excellent a statesman as he is, is a clumsy potter.

FIRST WOMAN

And if the blear-eyed Neoclides comes to insult you?

PRAXAGORA

To him I shall say, "Go and look at a dog's arse."

FIRST WOMAN

And if they fly at you?

PRAXAGORA

Oh! I shall shake them off as best I can; never fear, I know how to use this tool.[7]

FIRST WOMAN

But there is one thing we don't think of. If the Scythians drag you away, what will you do?

PRAXAGORA

With my arms akimbo like this, I will never, never let myself be taken round the middle.

FIRST WOMAN

If they seize you, we will bid them let you go.

SECOND WOMAN

That's the best way. But how are we going to remember to lift our arms in the Assembly when it's our legs we are used to lifting?

PRAXAGORA

It's difficult; yet it must be done, and the arm shown naked to the shoulder in order to vote. Quick now, put on these tunics and these Laconian shoes, as you see the men do each time they go to the Assembly or for a walk. When this is done, fix on your beards, and when they are arranged in the best way possible, dress yourselves in the cloaks you have stolen from your husbands; finally start off, leaning on your staffs and singing some old man's song as the villagers do.

FIRST WOMAN

Well spoken; and let us hurry to get to the Pnyx before the women from the country, for they will no doubt not fail to come there.

PRAXAGORA

Quick, quick, for it's the custom that those who are not at the Pnyx early in the morning return home empty-handed.

(PRAXAGORA *and the* FIRST *and* SECOND WOMEN *depart; those who are left behind form the* CHORUS.)

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Move forward, citizens, move forward; let us not forget to give ourselves this name and may that of *woman* never slip out of our mouths; woe to us, if it were discovered that we had laid such a plot in the darkness of night.

CHORUS (*singing*)

Let us go to the Assembly then, fellow-citizens; for the Thesmothetes have declared that only those who arrive at daybreak with haggard eye and covered with dust, without having snatched time to eat anything but a snack of garlic-pickle, shall alone receive the triobolus. Walk up smartly, Charitimides, Smicythus and Draces, and do not fail in any point of your part; let us first demand our fee and then vote for all that may perchance be useful for our partisans. . . . Ah! what am I saying? I meant to say, for our fellow-

citizens. Let us drive away these men of the city who used to stay at home and chatter round the table in the days when only an obolus was paid, whereas now one is stifled by the crowds at the Pnyx. No! during the archonship of generous Myronides, none would have dared to let himself be paid for the trouble he spent over public business; each one brought his own meal of bread, a couple of onions, three olives and some wine in a little wine-skin. But nowadays we run here to earn the three obols, for the citizen has become as mercenary as the stonemason.

(*The* CHORUS *marches away.* BLEPYRUS *appears in the doorway of his house, wearing* PRAXAGORA'S *Persian sandals and saffron robe.*)

BLEPYRUS

What does this mean? My wife has vanished! it is nearly daybreak and she does not return! I had to take a crap! I woke up and hunted in the darkness for my shoes and my cloak; but grope where I would, I couldn't find them. Meanwhile Mr. O'Shit [8] was already knocking on the door and I had only just time to seize my wife's little mantle and her Persian slippers. But where shall I find a place where I *can* take a crap? Bah! One place is as good as another at night-time; no one will see me. Ah! what a damned fool I was to take a wife at my age, and how I could thrash myself for having acted so stupidly! It's certainty she's not gone out for any honest purpose. But the thing to do now is to take a crap.

(*He squats.*)

A MAN (*looking out of the window of the house next door*)

Who's that? Is that not my neighbour Blepyrus? Why, yes, it's no other. Tell me, what's all that yellow about you? Can it be Cinesias who has befouled you so?

BLEPYRUS

No, no, I only slipped on my wife's tunic to come out in.

MAN

And where is your cloak?

BLEPYRUS

I cannot tell you; I hunted for it vainly on the bed.

MAN

And why did you not ask your wife for it?

BLEPYRUS

Ah! why indeed! because she is not in the house; she has run away, and I greatly fear that she may be doing me an ill turn.

MAN

But, by Posidon, it's the same with myself. My wife has disappeared with my cloak, and what is still worse, with my shoes as well; I cannot find them anywhere.

BLEPYRUS

Nor can I my Laconian ones; but as I urgently needed to crap, I popped my feet into these slippers, so as not to soil my blanket, which is brand new.

MAN

What does it mean? Can some friend have invited her to a feast?

BLEPYRUS

I expect so, for she does not generally misconduct herself, as far as I know.

MAN

What are you doing, making well-ropes? Are you never going to be done? As for myself, I would like to go to the Assembly, and it is time to start, but I've got to find my cloak; I have only one.

BLEPYRUS

I am going to have a look too, when I have finished crapping; but I really think there must be a wild pear obstructing my rectum.

MAN

Is it the one which Thrasybulus spoke about to the Lacedaemonians?

BLEPYRUS

Oh! oh! oh! how stopped up I am! Whatever am I to do? It's not merely for the present that I am frightened; but when I have eaten, where is my crap to find an outlet now? This damned McPear [9] fellow has bolted the door. Call a doctor; but who is the cleverest in this branch o the science? Amynon? Perhaps he would not come. Ah! Antisthenes! Let him be brought to me, cost what it will. To judge by his noisy sighs, that man knows what an arse wants, when it needs to crap. Oh! venerated Ilithyia! I shall burst unless the door gives way. Have pity! pity! Let me not become a thunder-mug for the comic poets.

(*Enter* CHREMES, *returning from the Assembly.*)

CHREMES

Hi! friend, what are you doing there? You're not crapping, are you?

BLEPYRUS (*finding relief at last*)

Oh! there! it is over and I can get up again.

CHREMES

What's this? You have your wife's tunic on.

BLEPYRUS

It was the first thing that came to my hand in the darkness. But where are you coming from?

CHREMES

From the Assembly.

BLEPYRUS

Is it already over then?

CHREMES

Certainly.

BLEPYRUS

Why, it is scarcely daylight.

CHREMES

I did laugh, ye gods, at the vermilion rope-marks that were to be seen all about the Assembly.[10]

BLEPYRUS

Did you get the triobolus?

CHREMES

Would it had so pleased the gods! but I arrived just too late, and am quite ashamed of it; I bring back nothing but this empty wallet.

BLEPYRUS

But why is that?

CHREMES

There was a crowd, such as has never been seen at the Pnyx, and the folk looked pale and wan, like so many shoemakers, so white were they in hue; both I and many another had to go without the triobolus.

BLEPYRUS

Then if I went now, I should get nothing.

CHREMES

No, certainly not, nor even had you gone at the second cock-crow.

BLEPYRUS

Oh! what a misfortune! "Oh, Antilochus! no triobolus! Even death would be better! I am undone!" But what can have attracted such a crowd at that early hour?

CHREMES

The Prytanes started the discussion of measures closely concerning the safety of the state; immediately, that blear-eyed fellow, the son of Neoclides, was the first to mount the platform. Then the folk shouted with their loudest voice, "What! he dares to speak, and that, too, when the safety of the state is concerned, and he a man who has not known how to save even his own eyebrows!" He, however, shouted louder than all of them, and looking at them asked, "Why, what ought I to have done?"

BLEPYRUS

Pound together garlic and laserpitium juice, add to this mixture some Laconian spurge, and rub it well into the eyelids at night. That's what I should have answered, had I been there.

CHREMES

After him that clever rascal Evaeon began to speak; he was naked, so far as we all could see, but he declared he had a cloak; he propounded the most popular, the most democratic, doctrines. "You see," he said, "I have the greatest need of sixteen drachmae, the cost of a new cloak, my health demands it; nevertheless I wish first to care for that of my fellow-citizens and of my country. If the fullers were to supply tunics to the indigent at the approach of winter, none would be exposed to pleurisy. Let him who has neither beds nor coverlets go to sleep at the tanners' after taking a bath; and if they shut the door in winter, let them be condemned to give him three goat-skins."

BLEPYRUS

By Dionysus, a fine, a very fine notion! Not a soul will vote against his proposal, especially if he adds that the flour-sellers must supply the poor with three measures of corn, or else suffer the severest penalties of the law; this is the only way Nausicydes can be of any use to us.

CHREMES

Then we saw a handsome young man rush into the tribune, he was all pink and white like young Nicias, and he began to say that the direction of matters should be entrusted to the women; this the crowd of shoemakers began applauding with all their might, while the country-folk assailed him with groans.

BLEPYRUS

And, indeed, they did well.

CHREMES

But they were outnumbered, and the orator shouted louder than they, saying much good of the women and much ill of you.

BLEPYRUS (*eagerly*)

And what did he say?

CHREMES

First he said you were a rogue . . .

BLEPYRUS

And you?

CHREMES

Wait a minute! . . . and a thief . . .

BLEPYRUS

I alone?

CHREMES

And an informer.

BLEPYRUS

I alone?

CHREMES

Why, no, by the gods! this whole crowd here.

(*He points to the audience.*)

BLEPYRUS

And who avers the contrary?

CHREMES

He maintained that women were both clever and thrifty, that they never divulged the Mysteries of Demeter, while you and I go about babbling incessantly about whatever happens at the Senate.

BLEPYRUS

By Hermes, he was not lying!

CHREMES

Then he added that the women lend each other clothes, trinkets of gold and silver, drinking-cups, and not before witnesses too, but all by themselves, and that they return everything with exactitude without ever cheating each other; whereas, according to him, *we* are ever ready to deny the loans we have effected.

BLEPYRUS

Yes, by Posidon, and in spite of witnesses.

CHREMES

Again, he said that women were not informers, nor did they bring lawsuits, nor hatch conspiracies; in short, he praised the women in every possible manner.

BLEPYRUS

And what was decided?

CHREMES

To confide the direction of affairs to them; it's the one and only innovation that has *not* yet been tried at Athens.

BLEPYRUS

And it was voted?

CHREMES

Yes.

BLEPYRUS

And everything that used to be the men's concern has been given over to the women?

CHREMES

You express it exactly.

BLEPYRUS

Thus it will be my wife who will go to the courts now in my stead?

CHREMES

And it will be she who will keep your children in your place.

BLEPYRUS

I shall no longer have to tire myself out with work from daybreak onwards?

CHREMES

No, 'twill be the women's business, and you can stay at home and amuse yourself with farting the whole day through.

BLEPYRUS

Well, what I fear for us fellows now is, that, holding the reins of government, they will forcibly compel us . . .

CHREMES

To do what?

BLEPYRUS

. . . to lay them.

CHREMES

And if we are not able?

BLEPYRUS

They will give us no dinner.

CHREMES

Well then, do your duty; dinner and love-making form a double enjoyment.

BLEPYRUS

Ah! but I hate compulsion.

CHREMES

But if it is for the public good, let us resign ourselves. It's an old saying that our absurdest and maddest decrees always somehow turn out for our good. May it be so in this case, oh gods, oh venerable Pallas! But I must be off; so, good-bye to you!
(*Exit.*)

BLEPYRUS

Good-bye, Chremes.

(*He goes back into his house.*)

CHORUS (*returning from the Assembly, still dressed like men; singing*)

March along, go forward. Is there some man following us? Turn round, examine everywhere and keep a good look-out; be on your guard against every trick, for they might spy on us from behind. Let us make as much noise as possible as we tramp. It would be a disgrace for all of us if we allowed ourselves to be caught in this deed by the men. Come, wrap yourselves up well, and search both right and left, so that no mischance may happen to us. Let us hasten our steps; here we are close to the meeting-place whence we started for the Assembly, and here is the house of our leader, the author of this bold scheme, which is now decreed by all the citizens. Let us not lose a moment in taking off our false beards, for we might be recognized and denounced. Let us stand under the shadow of this wall; let us glance round sharply with our eye to beware of surprises, while we quickly resume our ordinary dress. Ah! here is our leader, returning from the Assembly. Hasten to relieve your chins of these flowing manes. Look at your comrades yonder; they have already made themselves women again some while ago.

(*They remove the beards as* PRAXAGORA *and the other women enter from the right through the Orchestra.*)

PRAXAGORA

Friends, success has crowned our plans. But off with these cloaks and these boots quick, before any man sees you; unbuckle the Laconian straps and get rid of your staffs; (*to the* LEADER) and you help them with their toilet. As for myself, I am going to slip quietly into the house and replace my husband's cloak and other gear where I took them from, before he can suspect anything.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

There! it's done according to your bidding. Now tell us how we can be of service to you, so that we may show you our obedience, for we have never seen a cleverer woman than you.

PRAXAGORA

Wait! I only wish to use the power given me in accordance with your wishes; for, in the market-place, in the midst of the shouts and danger, I appreciated your indomitable courage.

(*Just as she is about to enter the house* BLEPYRUS *appears in the doorway.*)

BLEPYRUS

Eh, Praxagora! where are you coming from?

PRAXAGORA

How does that concern you, dear?

BLEPYRUS

Why, greatly! what a silly question!

PRAXAGORA

You don't think I have come from a lover's?

BLEPYRUS

No, perhaps not from only one.

PRAXAGORA

You can make yourself sure of that.

BLEPYRUS

And how?

PRAXAGORA

You can see whether my hair smells of perfume.

BLEPYRUS

What? cannot a woman possibly be laid without perfume, eh!

PRAXAGORA

The gods forfend, as far as I am concerned.

BLEPYRUS

Why did you go off at early dawn with my cloak?

PRAXAGORA

A companion, a friend who was in labour, had sent to fetch me.

BLEPYRUS

Could you not have told me?

PRAXAGORA

Oh, my dear, would you have me caring nothing for a poor woman in that plight?

BLEPYRUS

A word would have been enough. There's something behind all this.

PRAXAGORA

No, I call the goddesses to witness! I went running off; the poor woman who summoned me begged me to come, whatever might betide.

BLEPYRUS

And why did you not take *your* mantle? Instead of that, you carry off mine, you throw your dress upon the bed and you leave me as the dead are left, bar the chaplets and perfumes.

PRAXAGORA

It was cold, and I am frail and delicate; I took your cloak for greater warmth, leaving you thoroughly warm yourself beneath your coverlets.

BLEPYRUS

And my shoes and staff, those too went off with you?

PRAXAGORA

I was afraid they might rob me of the cloak, and so, to look like a man, I put on your shoes and walked with a heavy tread and struck the stones with your staff.

BLEPYRUS

D'you know you have made us lose a *sextary* of wheat, which I should have bought with the triobolus of the Assembly?

PRAXAGORA

Be comforted, for she had a boy.

BLEPYRUS

Who? the Assembly?

PRAXAGORA

No, no, the woman I helped. But has the Assembly taken place then?

BLEPYRUS

Did I not tell you of it yesterday?

PRAXAGORA

True; I remember now.

BLEPYRUS

And don't you know the decrees that have been voted?

PRAXAGORA

No indeed.

BLEPYRUS

Go to! you can live on lobster from now on, for they say the government is handed over to you.

PRAXAGORA

To do what—to spin?

BLEPYRUS

No, that you may rule . . .

PRAXAGORA

What?

BLEPYRUS

. . . over all public business.

PRAXAGORA (*as she exclaims this* CHREMES *reappears*)

Oh! by Aphrodité! how happy Athens will be!

BLEPYRUS

Why so?

PRAXAGORA

For a thousand reasons. None will dare now to do shameless deeds, to give false testimony or lay informations.

BLEPYRUS

Stop! in the name of the gods! Do you want me to die of hunger?

CHREMES

Good sir, let your wife speak.

PRAXAGORA

There will be no more thieves, nor envious people, no more rags nor misery, no more abuse and no more prosecutions and law-suits.

CHREMES

By Posidon! that's grand, if it's true!

PRAXAGORA

I shall prove it and you shall be my witness and even he (*pointing to Blepyrus*) will have no objections to raise.

CHORUS (*singing*)

You have served your friends, but now it behoves you to apply your ability and your care to the welfare of the people. Devote the fecundity of your mind to the public weal; adorn the citizens' lives with a thousand enjoyments and teach them to seize every favourable opportunity. Devise some ingenious method to secure the much-needed salvation of Athens; but let neither your acts nor your words recall anything of the past, for 'tis only innovations that please.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

But do not fail to put your plans into execution immediately; it's quick action that pleases the audience.

PRAXAGORA

I believe my ideas are good, but what I fear is that the public will cling to the old customs and refuse to accept my reforms.

CHREMES

Have no fear about that. Love of novelty and disdain for traditions, these are the dominating principles among us.

PRAXAGORA (*to the audience*)

Let none contradict nor interrupt me until I have explained my plan. I want all to have a share of everything and all property to be in common; there will no longer be either rich or poor; no longer shall we see one man harvesting vast tracts of land, while another has not ground enough to be buried in, nor one man surround himself with a whole army of slaves, while another has not a single attendant; I intend that there shall only be one and the same condition of life for all.

BLEPYRUS

But how do you mean for all?

PRAXAGORA (*impatiently*)

You'll eat dung before I do! [11]

BLEPYRUS

Won't the dung be common too?

PRAXAGORA

No, no, but you interrupted me too soon. This is what I was going to say: I shall begin by making land, money, everything that is private property, common to all. Then we shall live on this common wealth, which we shall take care to administer with wise thrift.

BLEPYRUS

And how about the man who has no land, but only gold and silver coins, that cannot be seen?

PRAXAGORA

He must bring them to the common stock, and if he fails he will be a perjured man.

BLEPYRUS

That won't worry him much, for has he not gained them by perjury?

PRAXAGORA

But his riches will no longer be of any use to him.

BLEPYRUS

Why?

PRAXAGORA

The poor will no longer be obliged to work; each will have all that he needs, bread, salt fish, cakes, tunics, wine, chaplets and chick-pease; of what advantage will it be to him not to contribute his share to the common wealth? What do you think of it?

BLEPYRUS

But is it not the biggest robbers that have all these things?

CHREMES

Yes, formerly, under the old order of things; but now that all goods are in common, what will he gain by not bringing his wealth into the general stock?

BLEPYRUS

If someone saw a pretty wench and wished to lay her, he would take some of his reserve store to make her a present and stay the night with her; this would not prevent him claiming his share of the common property.

PRAXAGORA

But he can sleep with her for nothing; I intend that women shall belong to all men in common, and each shall beget children by any man that wishes to have her.

BLEPYRUS

But all will go to the prettiest woman and try to lay her.

PRAXAGORA

The ugliest and the most flat-nosed will be side by side with the most charming, and to win the latter's favours, a man will first have to get into the former.

BLEPYRUS

But what about us oldsters? If we have to lay the old women first, how can we keep our tools from failing before we get into the Promised Land?

PRAXAGORA

They will make no resistance. Never fear; they will make no resistance.

BLEPYRUS

Resistance to what?

PRAXAGORA

To the pleasure of the thing. This is the way that matters will be ordered for you.

BLEPYRUS

It's very well conceived for you women, for every wench's hole will be filled; but what about the men? The women will run away from the ugly ones and chase the good-looking.

PRAXAGORA

The ugly will follow the handsomest into the public places after supper and see to it that the law, which forbids the women to sleep with the big, handsome men before having satisfied the ugly shrimps, is complied with.

BLEPYRUS

Thus ugly Lysicrates' nose will be as proud as the handsomest face?

PRAXAGORA

Yes, by Apollo! this is a truly popular decree, and what a set-back it will be for one of those elegants with their fingers loaded with rings, when a man with heavy shoes says to him, "Give way to me and wait till I have done; you will pass in after me."

BLEPYRUS

But if we live in this fashion, how will each one know his children?

PRAXAGORA

The youngest will look upon the oldest as their fathers.

BLEPYRUS

Ah! how heartily they will strangle all the old men, since even now, when each one knows his father, they make no bones about strangling him! then, my word! won't they just scorn and crap upon the old folks!

PRAXAGORA

But those around will prevent it. Hitherto, when anyone saw an old man beaten, he would not meddle, because it did not concern him; but now each will fear the sufferer may be his own father and such violence will be stopped.

BLEPYRUS

What you say is not so silly after all; but it would be highly unpleasant were Epicurus and Leucolophas to come up and call me father.

CHREMES

But it would be far worse, were . . .

BLEPYRUS

Were what?

CHREMES

. . . Aristyllus to embrace you and style you his father.

BLEPYRUS

He'll regret it if he does!

CHREMES

For you would smell vilely of mint if he kissed you. But he was born before the decree was carried, so that you have not to fear his kiss.

BLEPYRUS

It would be awful. But who will till the soil?

PRAXAGORA

The slaves. Your only cares will be to scent yourself, and to go and dine, when the shadow of the gnomon is ten feet long on the dial.

BLEPYRUS

But how shall we obtain clothing? Tell me that!

PRAXAGORA

You will first wear out those you have, and then we women will weave you others.

BLEPYRUS

Now another point: if the magistrates condemn a citizen to the payment of a fine, how is he going to do it? Out of the public funds? That would not be right surely.

PRAXAGORA

But there will be no more lawsuits.

BLEPYRUS

This rule will ruin you.

CHREMES

I think so too.

PRAXAGORA

Besides, my dear, why should there be lawsuits?

BLEPYRUS

Oh! for a thousand reasons, on my faith! Firstly, because a debtor denies his obligation.

PRAXAGORA

But where will the lender get the money to lend, if all is in common? unless he steals it out of the treasury? and he could not hide that!

CHREMES

Well thought out, by Demeter!

BLEPYRUS

But tell me this: here are some men who are returning from a feast and are drunk and they strike some passer-by; how are they going to pay the fine? Ah! you are puzzled now!

PRAXAGORA

They will have to take it out of their pittance; and being thus punished through their belly, they will not care to begin again.

BLEPYRUS

There will be no more thieves then, eh?

PRAXAGORA

Why steal, if you have a share of everything?

BLEPYRUS

People will not be robbed any more at night?

CHREMES

Not if you sleep at home.

PRAXAGORA

Even if you sleep outdoors there will be no more danger, for all will have the means of living. Besides, if anyone wanted to steal your cloak, you would give it to him yourself. Why not? You will only have to go to the common store and be given a better one.

BLEPYRUS

There will be no more playing at dice?

PRAXAGORA

What object will there be in playing?

BLEPYRUS

But what kind of life is it you propose to set up?

PRAXAGORA

The life in common. Athens will become nothing more than a single house, in which everything will belong to everyone; so that everybody will be able to go from one house to the other at pleasure.

BLEPYRUS

And where will the meals be served?

PRAXAGORA

The law-courts and the porticoes will be turned into dining-halls.

BLEPYRUS

And what will the speaker's platform be used for?

PRAXAGORA

I shall place the bowls and the ewers there; and young children will sing the glory of the brave from there, also the infamy of cowards, who out of very shame will no longer dare to come to the public meals.

BLEPYRUS

Well thought out, by Apollo! And what will you do with the urns?

PRAXAGORA

I shall have them taken to the market-place, and standing close to the statue of Harmodius, I shall draw a lot for each citizen, which by its letter will show the place where he must go to dine. Thus, those for whom I have

drawn an R will go to the royal portico; if it's a T, they will go to the portico of Theseus; if it's an F, to that of the flour-market.

BLEPYRUS

To cram himself there like a capon? [12]

PRAXAGORA

No, to dine there.

BLEPYRUS

And the citizen whom the lot has not given a letter showing where he is to dine will be driven off by everyone?

PRAXAGORA (*with great solemnity*)

But that will not occur. Each man will have plenty; he will not leave the feast until he is well drunk, and then with a chaplet on his head and a torch in his hand; and then the women running to meet you in the cross-roads will say, "This way, come to our house, you will find a beautiful young girl there."—"And I," another will call from her balcony, "have one so pretty and as white as milk; but before touching her, you must sleep with me." And the ugly men, watching closely after the handsome fellows, will say, "Hi! friend, where are you running to? Go in, but you must do nothing; it's the ugly and the flat-nosed to whom the law gives the right to make love first; amuse yourself on the porch while you wait, in handling your fig-leaves and playing with yourself." Well, tell me, does that picture suit you?

BLEPYRUS AND CHREMES

Marvellously well.

PRAXAGORA

I must now go to the market-place to receive the property that is going to be placed in common and to choose a woman with a loud voice as my herald. I have all the cares of state on my shoulders, since the power has been entrusted to me. I must likewise go to busy myself about establishing the common meals, and you will attend your first banquet to-day.

BLEPYRUS

Are we going to banquet?

PRAXAGORA

Why, undoubtedly! Furthermore, I propose abolishing the whores.

BLEPYRUS

And what for?

PRAXAGORA

It's clear enough why; so that, instead of them, *we* may have the first-fruits of the young men. It is not meet that tricked-out slaves should rob free-born women of their pleasures. Let the courtesans be free to sleep with the slaves.

BLEPYRUS

I will march at your side, so that I may be seen and that everyone may say, "Look at the Dictator's husband!"

(*He follows* PRAXAGORA *into their house.*)

CHREMES

As for me, I shall arrange my belongings and take inventory of them, in order that I may take them to the market-place.

(*He departs.*)

(*There is an interlude of dancing by the* CHORUS, *after which* CHREMES *returns with his belongings and arranges them in a long line.*)

CHREMES

Come hither, my beautiful sieve, I have nothing more precious than you, come, all clotted with the flour of which I have poured so many sacks through you; you shall act the part of Canephorus in the procession of my chattels. Where is the sunshade carrier? Ah! this stew-pot shall take his place. Great gods, how black it is! it could not be more so if Lysicrates had boiled the drugs in it with which he dyes his hair. Hither, my beautiful mirror. And you, my tripod, bear this urn for me; you shall be the water-bearer; and you, cock, whose morning song has so often roused me in the middle of the night to send me hurrying to the Assembly, you shall be my flute-girl. Scaphephorus, do you take the large basin, place in it the honeycombs and twine the olive-branches over them, bring the tripods and the phial of perfume; as for the humble crowd of little pots, I will just leave them behind.

CITIZEN (*watching* CHREMES *from a distance*)

What folly to carry one's goods to the common store; I have a little more sense than that. No, no, by Posidon, I want first to ponder and calculate over the thing at leisure. I shall not be fool enough to strip myself of the fruits of my toil and thrift, if it is not for a very good reason; let us see first which way things turn. (*He walks over to* CHREMES) Hi! friend, what means this display of goods? Are you moving or are you going to pawn your stuff?

CHREMES

Neither.

CITIZEN

Why then are you setting all these things out in line? Is it a procession that you are starting off to Hiero, the public crier?

CHREMES

No, but in accordance with the new law that has been decreed, I am going to carry all these things to the market-place to make a gift of them to the state.

CITIZEN

Oh! bah! you don't mean that.

CHREMES

Certainly.

CITIZEN

Oh! Zeus the Deliverer! you unfortunate man!

CHREMES

Why?

CITIZEN

Why? It's as clear as noonday.

CHREMES

Must the laws not be obeyed then?

CITIZEN

What laws, you poor fellow?

CHREMES

Those that have been decreed.

CITIZEN

Decreed! Are you mad, I ask you?

CHREMES

Am I mad?

CITIZEN

Oh! this is the height of folly!

CHREMES

Because I obey the law?

CITIZEN

Is that the duty of a smart man?

CHREMES

Absolutely.

CITIZEN

Say rather of a ninny.

CHREMES

Don't you propose taking what belongs to you to the common stock?

CITIZEN

I'll take good care I don't until I see what the majority are doing.

CHREMES

There's but one opinion, namely, to contribute every single thing one has.

CITIZEN

I am waiting to see it, before I believe that.

CHREMES

At least, so they say in every street.

CITIZEN (*sardonically*)

And they will go on saying so.

CHREMES

Everyone talks of contributing all he has.

CITIZEN (*in the same tone*)

And will go on talking of it.

CHREMES

You weary me with your doubts and dubitations.

CITIZEN (*in the same tone*)

Everybody else will doubt it.

CHREMES

The pest seize you!

CITIZEN (*in the same tone*)

It *will* take you. (*Then seriously*) What? give up your goods! Is there a man of sense who will do such a thing? Giving is not one of our customs. Receiving is another matter; it's the way of the gods themselves. Look at the position of their hands on their statues; when we ask a favour, they present their hands turned palm up so as not to give, but to receive.

CHREMES

Wretch, let me do what is right. Come, I'll make a bundle of all these things. Where is my strap?

CITIZEN

Are you really going to carry them in?

CHREMES

Undoubtedly, and there are my two tripods strung together already.

CITIZEN

What folly! Not to wait to see what the others do, and then . . .

CHREMES

Well, and then what?

CITIZEN

. . . wait and put it off again.

CHREMES

What for?

CITIZEN

That an earthquake may come or an ill-omened flash of lightning, that a black cat may run across the street and no one carry in anything more, you fool!

CHREMES

It would be a fine thing if I were to find no room left for placing all this.

CITIZEN

You are much more likely to lose your stuff. As for placing it, you can be at ease, for there will be room enough as long as a month hence.

CHREMES

Why?

CITIZEN

I know these people; a decree is readily passed, but it is not so easily attended to.

CHREMES

All will contribute their property, my friend.

CITIZEN

But what if they don't?

CHREMES

But there is no doubt that they will.

CITIZEN (*insistently*)

But *anyhow*, what if they don't?

CHREMES

Do not worry; they will.

CITIZEN

And what if they oppose it?

CHREMES

We shall compel them to do so.

CITIZEN

And what if they prove the stronger?

CHREMES

I shall leave my goods and go off.

CITIZEN

And what if they sell them for you?

CHREMES

The plague take you!

CITIZEN

And if it does?

CHREMES

It will be a good riddance.

CITIZEN (*in an incredulous tone*)

You are really *bent* on contributing, then?

CHREMES

'Pon my soul, yes! Look, there are all my neighbours carrying in all they have.

CITIZEN (*sarcastically*)

Oh yes, it's Antisthenes; he's the type that *would* contribute! He would just as soon spend the next month sitting on the can.

CHREMES

The pest seize you!

CITIZEN

Will Callimachus, the chorus-master, contribute anything?

CHREMES

Why, more than Callias!

CITIZEN

The man must want to spend *all* his money!

CHREMES

How you weary me!

CITIZEN

Ah! I weary you? But, wretch, see what comes of decrees of this kind. Don't you remember the one reducing the price of salt?

CHREMES

Why, certainly I do.

CITIZEN

And do you remember that about the copper coinage?

CHREMES

Ah! that cursed money did me enough harm. I had sold my grapes and had my mouth stuffed with pieces of copper; indeed I was going to the market to buy flour, and was in the act of holding out my bag wide open, when the herald started shouting, "Let none in future accept pieces of copper; those of silver are alone current."

CITIZEN

And quite lately, were we not all swearing that the impost of one-fortieth, which Euripides had conceived, would bring five hundred talents to the state, and everyone was vaunting Euripides to the skies? But when the thing was looked at closely, it was seen that this fine decree was mere moonshine and would produce nothing, and you would have willingly burnt this very same Euripides alive.

CHREMES

The cases are quite different, my good fellow. We were the rulers then, but now it's the women.

CITIZEN

Whom, by Posidon, I will never allow to piss on my nose.

CHREMES

I don't know what the devil you're chattering about. Slave, pick up that bundle.

HERALD (*a woman*)

Let all citizens come, let them hasten at our leader's bidding! It is the new law. The lot will teach each citizen where he is to dine; the tables are already laid and loaded with the most exquisite dishes; the couches are covered with the softest of cushions; the wine and water are already being mixed in the ewers; the slaves are standing in a row and waiting to pour scent over the guests; the fish is being grilled, the hares are on the spit and the cakes are being kneaded, chaplets are being plaited and the fritters are frying; the youngest women are watching the pea-soup in the saucepans, and in the midst of them all stands Smoeus, dressed as a knight, washing the crockery. And Geron has come, dressed in a grand tunic and finely shod; he is joking with another young fellow and has already divested himself of his heavy shoes and his cloak. The pantry man is waiting, so come and use your jaws.

(*Exit*)

CITIZEN

All right, I'll go. Why should I delay, since the state commands me?

CHREMES

And where are you going to, since you have not deposited your belongings?

CITIZEN

To the feast.

CHREMES

If the women have any wits, they will first insist on your depositing your goods.

CITIZEN

But I am going to deposit them.

CHREMES

When?

CITIZEN

I am not the man to make delays.

CHREMES

How do you mean?

CITIZEN

There will be many less eager than I.

CHREMES

In the meantime you are going to dine.

CITIZEN

What else should I do? Every sensible man must give his help to the state.

CHREMES

But if admission is forbidden you?

CITIZEN

I shall duck my head and slip in.

CHREMES

And if the women have you beaten?

CITIZEN

I shall summon them.

CHREMES

And if they laugh in your face?

CITIZEN

I shall stand near the door . . .

CHREMES

And then?

CITIZEN

. . . and seize upon the dishes as they pass.

CHREMES

Then go there, but after me. Sicon and Parmeno, pick up all this baggage.

CITIZEN

Come, I will help you carry it.

CHREMES (*pushing him away*)

No, no, I should be afraid of your pretending to the leader that what I am depositing belonged to you.

(*Exit with his belongings.*)

CITIZEN

Let me see! let me think of some good trick by which I can keep my goods and yet take my share of the common feast. (*He reflects for a moment.*) Ha! that's a fine idea! Quick! I'll go and dine, ha! ha!

(*Exit laughing.*)

(*Interlude of dancing by the* CHORUS.)

(*The scene shifts to a different section of Athens and the two houses are now to be thought of as those of two prostitutes.*)

First Old Woman (*leaning out of the window of one house*)

How is this? no men are coming? And yet it must be fully time! Then it is for naught that I have painted myself with white lead, dressed myself in my beautiful yellow robe, and that I am here, frolicking and humming between my teeth to attract some passer-by! Oh, Muses, alight upon my lips, inspire me with some soft Ionian love-song!

Young Girl (*in the window of the other house*)

You putrid old thing, you have placed yourself at the window before me. You were expecting to strip my vines during my absence and to trap some man in your snares with your songs. If you sing, I shall follow suit; all this singing will weary the spectators, but is nevertheless very pleasant and very diverting.

First Old Woman (*thumbing her nose at the* Young Girl)

Ha! here is an old man; take him and lead him away. (*To the flute-player*) As for you, you young flute-player, let us hear some airs that are worthy of you and me.

(*She sings*)

Let him who wishes to taste pleasure come to my side. These young things know nothing about it; it's only the women of ripe age who understand the art of love, and no one could know how to fondle the lover who possessed me so well as myself; the young girls are all flightiness.

Young Girl (*singing in her turn*)

Don't be jealous of the young girls; voluptuousness resides in the pure outline of their beautiful limbs and blossoms on their rounded breasts; but you, old woman, you who are tricked out and perfumed as if for your own funeral, are an object of love only for grim Death himself.

First Old Woman (*singing again*)

May your tongue be stopped; may you be unable to find your couch when you want to be loved. And on your couch, when your lips seek a lover, may you embrace only a viper!

Young Girl (*singing again*)

Alas! alas! what is to become of me? There is no lover! I am left here alone; my mother has gone out. (*Interrupting her song*) There's no need to mention the rest. (*Then singing again*) Oh! my dear nurse, I adjure you to call Orthagoras, and may heaven bless you. Ah! poor child, desire is consuming you like an Ionian woman; (*interrupting again*) and yet you are no stranger to the wanton arts of the Lesbian women. (*Resuming her song*) But you shall not rob me

of my pleasures; you will not be able to reduce or filch the time that first belongs to me.

First Old Woman

Sing as much as you please, peep out like a cat lying in wait, but none shall pass through your door without first having been to see me.

Young Girl

If anyone enter your house, it will be to carry out your corpse. And that will be something new for you, you rotten old thing!

First Old Woman

Can anything be new to an old woman? My old age will not harm you.

Young Girl

Ah! shame on your painted cheeks!

First Old Woman

Why do you speak to me at all?

Young Girl

And why do you place yourself at the window?

First Old Woman

I am singing to myself about my lover, Epigenes.

Young Girl

Can you have any other lover than that old fop Geres?

First Old Woman

Epigenes will show you that himself, for he is coming to me. See, here he is.

Young Girl

He's not thinking of you in the least.

First Old Woman

Aye, but he is.

Young Girl

Old starveling! Let's see what he will do. I will leave my window.

First Old Woman

And I likewise. You will see I am much wiser than you.

A Young Man (*sings*)

Ah! could I but sleep with the young girl without first making love to the old flat-nose! It is intolerable for a free-born man.

FIRST OLD WOMAN (*singing to the same tune*)

Willy nilly, you must first gratify my desire. There shall be no nonsense about that, for my authority is the law and the law must be obeyed in a democracy.

(*Speaking*) But come, let me hide, to see what he's going to do. (*She retires.*)

YOUNG MAN

Ah! ye gods, if I were to find the sweet child alone! the wine has fired my lust.

YOUNG GIRL (*reappearing in her window*)

I have tricked that cursed old wretch; she has left her window, thinking I would stay at home. Ah! here is the lover we were talking of.

(*She sings*)

This way, my love, this way, come here and haste to rest the whole night in my arms. I worship your lovely curly hair; I am consumed with ardent desire. Oh! Eros, in thy mercy, compel him to my bed.

YOUNG MAN (*standing beneath the* YOUNG GIRL'S *window and singing*)

Come down and haste to open the door unless you want to see me fall dead with desire. Dearest treasure, I am burning to yield myself to voluptuous sport, lying on your bosom, to let my hands play with your bottom. Aphrodité, why dost thou fire me with such delight in her? Oh! Eros, I beseech thee, have mercy and make her share my couch. Words cannot express the tortures I am suffering. Oh! my adored one, I adjure you, open your door for me and press me to your heart; 'tis for you that I am suffering. Oh! my jewel, my idol, you child of Aphrodité, the confidante of the Muses, the sister of the Graces, you living picture of voluptuousness, oh! open for me, press me to your heart, 'tis for you that I am suffering.

(*He knocks.*)

FIRST OLD WOMAN (*reappearing suddenly*)

What are you knocking for? Are you looking for me?

YOUNG MAN

What an idea!

FIRST OLD WOMAN

But you were tapping at the door.

YOUNG MAN

Death would be sweeter.

First Old Woman

Why do you come with that torch in your hand?

Young Man

I am looking for a man from Anaphlystia.

First Old Woman

What's his name?

Young Man

Oh! it's not Sebinus, whom no doubt you are expecting.

First Old Woman (*taking him by the arm*)

By Aphrodité, you *must*, whether you like it or not.

Young Man (*shaking her off*)

We are not now concerned with cases dated sixty years back; they are remanded for a later day; we are dealing only with those of less than twenty.

First Old Woman

That was under the old order of things, sweetheart, but now you must first busy yourself with us.

Young Man

Aye, *if I want to*, according to the rules of draughts, where we may either take or leave.

First Old Woman

But it's not according to the rules of draughts that you take your seat at the banquet.

Young Man

I don't know what you mean; it's at *this* door I want to knock.

First Old Woman (*standing in his way*)

Not before knocking at mine first.

Young Man (*haughtily*)

For the moment I really have no need for old leather.

First Old Woman

I know that you love me; perhaps you are surprised to find me at the door. But come, let me kiss you.

Young Man (*pulling back; sarcastically*)

No, no, my dear, I am afraid of your lover.

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Of whom?

YOUNG MAN

The most gifted of painters.

FIRST OLD WOMAN

And who is he?

YOUNG MAN

The artist who paints the little bottles on coffins. But get you indoors, lest he should find you at the door.

FIRST OLD WOMAN

I know what you want.

YOUNG MAN

I can say as much of you.

FIRST OLD WOMAN (*hanging on to him*)

By Aphrodité, who has granted me this good chance, I won't let you go.

YOUNG MAN

You are drivelling, you little old hag.

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Rubbish! I am going to lead you to my couch.

YOUNG MAN

What need for buying hooks? I will let her down to the bottom of the well and pull up the buckets with her old carcase, for she's crooked enough for that.

FIRST OLD WOMAN

A truce to your jeering, poor boy, and follow me.

YOUNG MAN

Nothing compels me to do so, unless you have paid the levy of five hundredths for me.[13]

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Look, by Aphrodité, there is nothing that delights me as much as sleeping with a lad of your years.

YOUNG MAN

And I abhor such as you, and I will never, never consent.

First Old Woman

But, by Zeus, here is something will force you to it.

(*She shows him a document.*)

Young Man

What's that?

First Old Woman

A decree, which orders you to enter my house.

Young Man

Read it out then, and let's hear.

First Old Woman

Listen. "The women have decreed that if a young man desires a young girl, he can only lay her after having satisfied an old woman; and if he refuses and goes to seek the maiden, the old women are authorized to seize him and drag him in."

Young Man

Alas! I shall become a Procrustes.

First Old Woman

Obey the law.

Young Man

But if a fellow-citizen, a friend, came to pay my ransom?

First Old Woman

No man may dispose of anything above a medimnus.

Young Man

But may I not enter an excuse?

First Old Woman

There's no evasion.

Young Man

I shall declare myself a merchant and so escape service.

First Old Woman

Beware what you do!

Young Man

Well! what is to be done?

First Old Woman

Follow me.

YOUNG MAN

Is it absolutely necessary?

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Yes, as surely as if Diomedes had commanded it.

YOUNG MAN

Well then, first spread out a layer of origanum upon four pieces of wood; bind fillets round your head, bring phials of scent and place a bowl filled with lustral water before your door.[14]

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Will you buy a chaplet for me too?

YOUNG MAN

Yes, if you outlast the tapers; for I expect to see you fall down dead as you go in.

YOUNG GIRL (*running out of her house*)

Where are you dragging this unfortunate man to?

FIRST OLD WOMAN

To my own bed.

YOUNG GIRL

That's not right. A young fellow like him is not of the age to suit you. You ought to be his mother rather than his wife. With these laws in force, the earth will be filled with Oedipuses.

(*She takes him away with her.*)

FIRST OLD WOMAN

Oh! you cursed pest! it's envy that makes you say this; but I will be revenged.

(*She goes back into her house.*)

YOUNG MAN

By Zeus the Deliverer, what a service you have done me, by freeing me of this old wretch! with what ardour I will show you my gratitude in a substantial form!

(*Just as he begins to go in with the* YOUNG GIRL *an even older and uglier woman enters.*)

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Hi! you there! where are you taking that young man to, in defiance of the law? The decree ordains that he must first sleep with me.

YOUNG MAN

Oh! what a misfortune! Where does *this* hag come from? She's a more frightful monster than the other even.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Come here.

(*She takes him by the arm.*)

YOUNG MAN (*to the* YOUNG GIRL)

Oh! I beg you, don't let me be led off by her!

SECOND OLD WOMAN

It's not I but the law that leads you off.

YOUNG MAN

No, it's not the law, but an Empusa with a body covered with blemishes and blotches.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Follow me, my handsome little friend, come along quickly without any more ado.

YOUNG MAN

Oh! let me go to the can first, so that I may gather my wits somewhat. Else I should be so terrified that you would see me letting out something yellow.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Never mind! you can crap, if you want, in my house.

YOUNG MAN

More than I want to, I'm afraid; but I offer you two good securities.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

I don't require them.

(*A* THIRD OLD WOMAN, *the ugliest yet, now appears.*)

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Hi! friend, where are you off to with that woman?

YOUNG MAN

I am not going with her, but am being dragged by force. Oh! whoever you are, may heaven bless you for having had pity on me in my dire misfortune. (*Turns round and sees the* THIRD OLD WOMAN.) Oh Heracles! oh Pan! oh Corybantes! oh Dioscuri! Why, she is still more awful! Oh! what a monster! great gods! Are you an ape plastered with white lead, or the ghost of some old hag returned from the dark borderlands of death?

THIRD OLD WOMAN (*taking his other arm*)

No jesting! Follow me.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

No, come this way.

THIRD OLD WOMAN

I will never let you go.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Nor will I.

YOUNG MAN

But you will rend me asunder, you cursed wretches.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

I'm the one he must go with according to the law.

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Not if an uglier old woman than yourself appears.

YOUNG MAN

But if you kill me at the outset, how shall I afterwards go to find this beautiful girl of mine?

THIRD OLD WOMAN

That's your problem. But begin by obeying.

YOUNG MAN

Of which one must I rid myself first?

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Don't you know? Come here.

YOUNG MAN

Then let the other one release me.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Come to *my* house.

YOUNG MAN

If this dame will let me go.

THIRD OLD WOMAN

No, by all the gods, I'll not let you go.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Nor will I.

YOUNG MAN

You would make very bad boatwomen.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

Why?

YOUNG MAN

Because you would tear your passengers to pieces in dragging them on board.

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Then come along, do, and hold your tongue.

SECOND OLD WOMAN

No, by Zeus, come with me.

YOUNG MAN

It's clearly a case for the decree of Cannonus; I must cut myself in two in order to lay you both. But how am I to work two oars at once?

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Easily enough; you have only to eat a full pot of onions.[15]

YOUNG MAN

Oh! great gods! here I am close to the door and being dragged in!

SECOND OLD WOMAN (*to* THIRD OLD WOMAN)

You will gain nothing by this, for I shall rush into your house with you.

YOUNG MAN

Oh, no! no! better to suffer a single misfortune than two.

THIRD OLD WOMAN

Ah! by Hecaté, whether you wish it or not . . .

YOUNG MAN

What a fate is mine, that I must make love to such a stinking harridan the whole night through and all day; then, when I am rid of her, I have still to tackle a brick-coloured hag! Am I not truly unfortunate? Ah! by Zeus the Deliverer; under what fatal star must I have been born, that I must sail in company with such monsters! But if my bark sinks in the sewer of these strumpets, may I be buried at the very threshold of the door; let this hag be stood upright on my grave, let her be coated alive with pitch and her legs covered with molten lead up to the ankles, and let her be set alight as a funeral lamp.

(*The* YOUNG MAN *is dragged off by the two* OLD WOMEN, *one on each arm.*)

(*Interlude of dancing by the* CHORUS.)

A Servant-Maid to Praxagora (*she comes from the banquet*)

What happiness is the people's! what joy is mine, and above all that of my mistress! Happy are ye, who form choruses before our house! Happy are ye, both neighbours and fellow-citizens! Happy am I myself! I am but a servant, and yet I have poured on my hair the most exquisite essences. Let thanks be rendered to thee, Oh, Zeus! But a still more delicious aroma is that of the wine of Thasos; its sweet bouquet delights the drinker for a long time, whereas the others lose their bloom and vanish quickly. Therefore, long life to the wine-jars of Thasos! Pour yourselves out unmixed wine, it will cheer you the whole night through, if you choose the liquor that possesses most fragrance. (*To the* Chorus) But tell me, friends, where is my mistress's husband?

Leader of the Chorus

Wait for him here; he will no doubt pass this way.

Maid-Servant

Ah! there he is just going to dinner. Oh! master! what joy! what blessedness is yours!

Blepyrus

Mine?

Maid-Servant

None can compare his happiness to yours; you have reached its utmost height, you who, alone out of thirty thousand citizens have not yet dined.

Leader of the Chorus

Aye, here is undoubtedly a truly happy man.

Maid-Servant

Where are you off to?

Blepyrus

I am going to dine.

Maid-Servant

By Aphrodité, you will be the last of all, far and away the last. Yet my mistress has bidden me take you and take with you these young girls. Some Chian wine is left and lots of other good things. Therefore hurry, and invite likewise all the spectators whom we have pleased, and such of the judges as are not against us, to follow us; we will offer them everything they can desire.

BLEPYRUS

Generously invite everyone and omit no one, old or young. Dinner is ready for all; they need only go home. As for me, I shall go to the banquet with the customary torch in my hand.

MAID-SERVANT

But why do you tarry, Blepyrus? Take these young girls with you and, while you are away a while, I will whet my appetite with some dining-song.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

I have but a few words to say: let the wise judge me because of whatever is wise in this piece, and those who like a laugh by whatever has made them laugh. In this way I address pretty well everyone. If the lot has assigned my comedy to be played first of all, don't let that be a disadvantage to me; engrave in your memory all that shall have pleased you in it and judge the competitors equitably as you have bound yourselves by oath to do. Don't act like vile courtesans, who never remember any but their last lover.

MAID-SERVANT

It is time, friends, high time to go to the banquet, if we want to have our share of it. Open your ranks and let the Cretan rhythms regulate your dances.

BLEPYRUS

That's what I am doing.

MAID-SERVANT

And you others, let your light steps too keep time. Very soon we'll be eating *lépadotémachosélachogáleokránioleípsanodrímypotrímmatosílphiotýromélitokátakechýmenokíchlepikóssyphophátto perísteraléktryonóptokephálliokínklopeleíolagoíosiraíobaphétragalópterygón.*[16] Come, quickly, seize hold of a plate, snatch up a cup, and let's run to secure a place at table. The rest will have their jaws at work by this time.

CHORUS (*as they depart, dancing, with* BLEPYRUS *leading them*)

Dance gaily! *Iai! Iai!* We shall dine! *Euoi! Euai! Euai!* As for a triumph! *Euoi! Euoi! Euai! Euai!*